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LIVED EXPERIENCE IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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There is amazing diversity in Catholic schools globally. Estimates from the Church suggest that in 2020, 35 million children were enrolled in primary Catholic schools globally, with another 19 million enrolled in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{1} The experience of a student in a Catholic school in the United States may be very different from that of a student in India, or the Democratic Republic of Congo. The context in which Catholic schools operate, whether in terms of access to public funding or trends in enrollment, is also different depending on the country context. Global enrollment in Catholic schools more than doubled since the 1970s,\textsuperscript{2} with most of this growth observed in sub-Saharan Africa, and to a lower extent in South Asia. By contrast, enrollment in higher income countries and especially in the United States has been flat or declining.

This issue of the \textit{Journal of Global Catholicism} is dedicated to lived experience in Catholic schools. With articles reflecting on experiences from Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Nigeria, the emphasis is on sub-Saharan Africa as the region with the fastest growing enrollment in Catholic schools; but one of the articles focuses on the United States, and an additional contribution is global in nature, based on 130 interviews with Catholic educators.

Much of the research and attention placed on education systems focuses today on improving student performance, with metrics to assess progress based on standardized assessments. This is needed as too many students are not learning nearly enough in school. According to learning poverty estimates from the World Bank and collaborating United Nations agencies, a child is considered learning poor if s/he cannot read and understand an age-appropriate text by age 10. In low- and middle-income countries in 2019, more than half of 10-year-old children were considered learning poor. In sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion was at almost nine in ten children.\textsuperscript{3} The situation has deteriorated further since, as the COVID-19 pandemic led to lengthy school closures in many countries and associated losses in learning.

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Improving the education provided in school, including in Catholic schools, is an absolute necessity and it deserves our focus.

At the same time, the role of schools and more generally the role of education is much broader. Ensuring that students acquire foundational skills, enabling them to complete their secondary education, and providing opportunities to access higher education and/or land jobs that provide decent pay and a fulfilling professional career is very important. But in addition, schools are meant to educate the whole child, as Pope Francis argued in a video message in October 2020 for his initiative to call for a renewed commitment or Global Compact on Education.⁴

In that video message, the Pope called for seven commitments in education, one of which is the commitment “to welcome.” The first article by Father Alexandre Bingo is entitled “Catholic Education and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism: The Private Catholic High School Saint Luc in Burkina Faso.” Fr. Bingo used to be the diocesan director for Catholic education in Burkina Faso and is now the principal of the Catholic high school Saint Luke of Banfora. How can a Catholic school carry out its mission in a context of religious pluralism? In Burkina Faso, people of various faiths used to live peacefully together, and the country was often hailed as a haven of tolerance. This remains to a large extent true, but as is the case for the Sahel region more broadly, terrorism has led to major challenges. Estimates from the Ministry of National Education, Literacy, and the Promotion of National Languages suggest that as of the end of December 2021, some 3,280 schools (13% of all schools in the country) had been closed due to raid by armed extremists. In January 2022, the military seized power, ousting President Kaboré.

Ensuring mutual respect and harmony among students from different faiths who study in Catholic schools is probably even more important now than it was in the past. Fr. Bingo explains how in practice his school promotes respect for each other’s faith while being faithful to its mission. As one example, the school’s Balimaya committee consists of students representing different religions and whose role

includes preparing events specific to various religions. At the beginning of Lent, Muslim students wish all Christians a good time of Lent, while the same is done for the fast of Ramadan in a message shared by Christian students. In addition, during both Lent and the Ramadan fast, Christian and Muslim students set aside money and donated the proceeds to an orphanage in the local area. As Fr. Bingo explains it in concluding his article:

This education is not synonymous with renouncing one’s cultural or religious identity. It is openness to the other, as he is, acceptance of the other as he believes. We cannot love each other without knowing each other; we cannot know each other without going to the other. In the African context, education in accepting the other in what is most dear to him, his relationship to God, is more necessary than ever. In a multi-faith social context, it is essential to put at the heart of any educational project the concern to discover the other in his relationship to transcendence…. We learn to believe well in order to live better together. It is faith in the service of social cohesion, a weapon against violent extremism in the world.

Violence in schools—whether physical, emotional, or sexual, remains pervasive in most countries, including in sub-Saharan Africa. It can have highly detrimental impacts on students, leading some of the students to drop out of school and others to not learn enough. Violence in school is also associated with negative health impacts, including for mental health. If students are at risk of violence in schools, the schools are not safe, and are clearly not welcoming. Another commitment for the Global Compact on Education is to listen to the voices of children and young people. This is especially important to find solutions to issues such as violence in school. The guide for action, or vademecum, for Pope Francis’ Global Compact emphasizes the need to start by listening, noting that in Latin e-ducere means “to bring out, to bring to light, to prepare the good soil, preparing it to welcome the seed of knowledge.”6 Educators are encouraged to empower students and young

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people, including through advisory and decision-making capacities in schools and other learning institutions.

The second article which I co-authored with Sister Antoinette Nneka Opara illustrates this commitment. Entitled “Student Experiences with Violence in Schools: Insights from a Survey in Two Catholic Schools for Girls in Nigeria,” the article suggests that teachers and administrators aiming to understand patterns of violence in their school and how to reduce them can learn from simple surveys implemented among students with both open-ended and closed questions. The analysis is based on surveys implemented in two all-girl secondary Catholic schools in Nigeria. The data indicate that violence is pervasive, although most forms of violence are relatively mild according to the students. Proposals for curbing violence are outlined based on suggestions from students as well as the experience of school administrators and findings from the literature. As the authors conclude:

The two schools that implemented the survey received key results … to enable teachers and administrators to improve the school culture and learning environment. The schools’ disciplinary committee and management teams studied the responses and identified areas that could be improved for both school procedures and student relationships. The students’ Councils also discussed some aspects of the survey to create awareness on available procedures for resolving conflicts. The document proved to be worthwhile for creating awareness on the issues that can lead to violence in the schools and how various available strategies could enable solutions, in particular to rebuild strained relationships among staff and students. While there is no magic bullet to end violence in schools, progress can be made.

The need for schools to welcome applies to students, but it also applies to teachers and even to principals. In sub-Saharan Africa, and especially in countries where Catholic schools have a large footprint, a majority of the schools are funded by the state and considered as part of the public school system. This is the case in Ghana, where the state also funds other types of religious schools such as Islamic schools. Funding by the state provides opportunities since it enables Catholic schools to provide their services mostly free of tuition and other out-of-pocket costs for
parents, but it also implies some obligations and may lead to constraints. This is the case when teachers or principals are selected by the state and not the Church.

The third article by Father Joseph Domfeh is entitled “Selection and Faith/Spiritual Formation of Catholic Public School Lay Principals in Ghana.” While Catholic schools strive to maintain a particular identity, this is not easy when they operate as public schools. The article focuses on the selection and faith/spiritual formation of lay principals in Ghana’s Catholic public schools. With a focus on the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana, four questions are explored: (1) How are lay principals selected, trained, and appointed to head Catholic public schools? (2) In what ways, if any, do they learn about the vision and mission of Catholic education? (3) How do formative spiritual programs help them exercise their duties as spiritual leaders?, and (4) In what ways do they promote their schools’ Catholic identity? By and large, the analysis suggests that existing spiritual formation programs are insufficient. The author concludes with four main recommendations:

Based on the insights gained in the study, a few recommendations can be made. Recommendation 1: Reinvigorate a comprehensive protocol with accountability codes regarding the selection and appointment of lay principals of Catholic public schools. … Recommendation 2: Empower the Diocesan Education Council to become more effective. … Recommendation 3: Establish a diocesan spiritual and educational leadership orientation and professional development center. … Recommendation 4: Expose future schoolteachers and administrators to fundamental theories and practices of educational administration.

While the first three articles are on lived experience in Catholic schools in sub-Saharan Africa, the fourth article is about the United States where enrollment in Catholic schools has been declining for half a century. This decline has been attributed to multiple factors, including a lack of affordability of the schools due to a lack of public funding (with rare exceptions, for example for voucher programs), a weakening of the perception of excellence associated that the schools used to benefit from, and secularization. The sexual abuse crisis in the Church may also have contributed to the decline in enrollment. To stem this decline, Catholic schools will need to find better ways to welcome, including welcoming more students who
may not be Catholic themselves or whose family may not be practicing. This may require adjustments, but it also provides opportunities, and Catholic schools happen to have a few particular strengths that have remained relatively untapped so far.

The last article is entitled “Decline in Student Enrollment, Parental Willingness to Consider Catholic Schools, and Sources of Comparative Advantage in the United States.” The first part of the article reviews the literature on factors that contributed to the long-term decline in enrollment. The second part of the article relies on market research data to argue that many parents who have not enrolled their (youngest) child in a Catholic school might be willing to do so. In other words, there may be opportunities for enrollment growth. The last part of the article mentions some of the adjustments that may be needed, while also noting three relatively untapped sources of comparative advantage that could improve students’ lived experience in Catholic schools: engaging alumni, emphasizing socio-emotional learning (SEL), and establishing connections. For example, on SEL, the article argues that:

Catholic schools—and the Pope himself—have long decried an excessive emphasis placed by school systems on student performance as measured by standardized assessments. Beyond cognitive skills, research suggests that five core skills related to social and emotional learning (SEL) enable success at school and in life: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Given their mission and values, many Catholic schools already embrace SEL, but some schools could do better. … This is not a matter of adding an extra class on SEL per week to the curriculum, but rather to weave SEL through the whole curriculum, reinforce progress when students demonstrate an acquisition of those skills, and provide support when this is not the case. … Acquisition of socio-emotional skills often leads to gains in well-being, positive attitudes, and pro-social behavior, reductions in risky behaviors such as violence and substance abuse, and improvements in academic performance. … With both students and teachers benefiting, this may transform the entire culture of a school.

Finally, an additional contribution in this issue is a discussion of the commitments suggested by Pope Francis for the Global Compact on Education based on 130
interviews conducted with educators for the Global Catholic Education project. The aim is to explore lived experience in Catholic schools in a broader way. Stories and insights from the interviews are shared to illustrate how educators are already putting the seven commitments of the Global Compact into practice. Hopefully, some of the stories and initiatives shared through these interviews will serve as a source of inspiration for your own work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


